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ABSTRACT

The methods used by a college freshman composition teacher to make writing an authentic and natural activity for students are outlined in this paper. Among the techniques described are the use of (1) warm-up activities to encourage sharing written efforts, with teacher-as-participant; (2) peer editing groups; (3) reflection questions; (4) student journals; (5) visual stimuli; (6) interviews with local professional writers; and (7) letters in defense of a class activity. Examples of student writing are appended. (AEA)

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"The Basic Comp Class as Rhetorical Situation"

presented at the 1982 CCCC in San Francisco

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by

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Initially, my writing students remind me of Huck Finn when he dismisses Miss Watson's story of Moses in the Bulrushes because he "won't take no stock in dead people." Like Huck, they are inclined to take no stock in dead people, or lifeless activities. They don't want to write, or feel that they cannot write about something which doesn't interest them. In fact, for many, writing is a dead art, practiced only by English teachers.

So how does the instructor of 100 composition students prevent Dead-On-Arrival assignments? How can an instructor who wants to engage the class in a dialogue, an animated exchange of information that is meaningful, fashion structured activities that develop these students' skills?

As a graduate student teaching basic writing at the University of Iowa's Writing Lab, I did not have to answer those questions. I had an almost ideal situation--four motivated students with whom I could spend at least fifteen minutes of each hour that we met. I did not appreciate that luxury, instead, grew to believe it should be the only way. I watched students' writing bloom under one-on-one attention from tutors like myself, the perceptions of other writing students, and an immediate response to their papers. Assured of an audience that was right there and willing to care, over a semester, these students often made quantum conceptual leaps: from writing incomplete sentences, disorganized essays that couldn't develop one idea, to becoming fluent, interesting writers who were confident in what they had to say because someone would read it and care.

Those questions of how to engage the class in a dialogue, emerged, however, once I hit my real world: 100 writing students and grades.

There was no way that I could deal with all of them individually. In desperation, I had them write and write and write. This meant that I read and read and read. That was no solution. I now had two sets of glasses, a burgeoning case of burn-out my first semester of teaching, and a sense of fatalism that would have made Camus appear to be an optimist. So what was I to do?

I began to grow more confident in what I, as a writer, knew--deciding to bring the concepts that I worked with as a poet to class. Somehow, I would reseurect the approach that I respected in the Iowa Writing Lab. Not everything would need to be graded, nor would I have the students write for the sake of writing. I knew, too, that my best work was what I was involved with, felt was worth saying, and consequently, worth reading.

Based on my own writing habits and lab work, I would attempt to structure a class that would allow students to evolve from egocentric writing to writing for the more public world, a writing that would entail performing more complex tasks. What was most important, however, was my desire not to hear: "Well, I have to write this, but I only do this for class, for her." This dismissal, of what I held so dear, hurt.

But it did more than that: it revealed a basic problem that had to be overcome if the students were ever to write anything meaningful, ever to conceive of writing as a worthy activity, something that they might confidently choose to do.

What I attempted to do, beyond my efforts to mold writing skills, and help the students write Standard English, was to involve them in writing. The class would be a place where writing was not the dreaded task, to be performed only because of a teacher's injunctions.

It would be something which would evolve naturally out of all situations. Writing would become the only response, the right response. In a sense, it was de-mystifying the writing process but also structuring assignments that took advantage of student knowledge, would allow personal writing contact, and replace the lengthy person-to-person dialogue that the Writing Lab nourished, with a sense of involvement and immediacy. Although I would not be able to spend 45 minutes with each of my 100 writing students, weekly, I could evolve a series of assignments and in-class activities which would make them feel as if someone were looking over their shoulders, reading, nodding approval, suggesting changes and asking questions.

For writing to be a natural response, an audience of trusting sharers must be nutured. (For an excellent discussion of this and some ideas that are similar to mine, I refer you to Peter Elbow's Writing With Power, chapter two on sharing.) This environment can be tended from the first day, by establishing the type of class where people listen to what the other says, and show appreciation, not only for well-written work, but for the simple, but difficult quality of sharing.

At the semester's beginning, warming-up activities, so that the students have a sense of who each person is, occur. Part of a class period interviewing a fellow student and jotting down a few biographical notes is helpful, as is a visit (as a class) to a local, somewhat unusual, attraction. This visit can be followed by a brief writing session, when the students take out their new journal and record their impressions. Students' passing around the observations and making appreciative remarks enables them to begin to share their writing in a non-threatening, positive manner and to see

the important differences in viewpoints. A few other warm-up exercises, such as writing briefly about some funny incident they observed or were a part of, are also helpful. I, too, participate, passing around what I have written to cut down the distance between teacher/grader and teacher/sharer/responder. Since I write, it illustrates my belief in writing as a form of communication.

In every class, the students and I write, either replying to questions relevant to the class or to share a thought. The time element of this isn't as crucial as the activity of written exchange. But in every class, usually, we write either in the journal, respond on paper, in peer groups, to student papers, or free write in response to a question. I want to set up a class the way a foreign language class is structured. When you study a language, you speak only in that language while you are in the class, an activity that becomes natural. And so, in writing class, the emphasis is the same: writing is the medium.

Once an atmosphere of trust has begun to develop, it is easier to build on that and begin to have students discover and invent, looking to each other for feedback and suggestions. Initially, when the students are first sharing their words, I roam the classroom, trying to give everyone some word, a touch on the shoulder, an appreciative chuckle, or a query: "How about letting us see that a bit more; It sounds great." I ask the other students in one group to mention what they liked about a paper, nail them with a crucial question, "Why?" or "What would you like to steal from this paper?"

Later on, partially because I have moved around the room, setting the tone and attempting to bring students out of their tendency to

say nothing or say just a few, general remarks, they begin to respond to their peers' papers, preserving and giving that essential element--an immediate reaction to another's writing. And as the students take the time to write out a careful response that is conscious of the author's needs, they, too, begin to apply their burgeoning critical skills to their own work. They internalize the questions that they, and the class as a whole, have evolved to help their peers, becoming their own best critics. To help them, I use the reflection questions, slightly movified, that Linda Shadow recommends in her article, "Eureka! Moments and Reflection Questions," in the 1979-1980 NCTE publication, How to Handle the Paperload, pp. 65-66.

Reflective questions like: "What part of your paper would you spend more time on if you had it? Why?"[1] work excedingly well. For the most part, the students know instinctually what areas of their work need further improvement. Their own "listening to their writing" is crucial; I build upon it, praising their critical abilities and the making specific suggestions for improvement on an area that they have already acknowledge as being weak. It is then no surprise to them that they need to pay a bit more attention to that aspect of their writing, and so the non-threatening but helpful immediate dialogue continues. The reflection questions or concepts similar to this, enable spirals of dialogue to continue towards revision and newer understanding.

Lest you think that my classes of burgeoning Clive Barnes are an anomoly, they are considered basic writers, a fairly typical popularion for freshman writing courses. Most can write complete, albeit boring, sentences, and hold together a superficial essay.

Their writing is universally choked with generalizations and indifference, with nary a specific in sight. Often their writng is what Macrorie aptly calls, "English," competent but canned, about as desirable as a T.V. dinner version of cavier and quiche.

Again I use the journal to help them get away from trite observations, things that they have heard everyone say. I cannot stress the journal enough as a tool. I have used one for three years now and know that it does not need to 100 versions of "I am so lonely," those embarrassing confessions that harry a teacher. The journal is a place where a feeling like that is noted but then explored, delved into, encouraged to develop further so that an equisitive personal paper on "The Lack of Communication" emerges, or a paper like the one on page 3 of the handout.

In my classes, I present a variety of possiblities for the journal. Things are: where do they think they will be in five years, what has made you laugh, and think back to your 1st. As a class, we write together, at the beginning of the semester, to set up a community of writers, all of us sharing in the effort of articulating a common experience. I find that visual stimuli works well, so I bring in pictures which are different from the terrain surrounding the university, objects which are unique, so that when the class has written ten or fifteen minutes on what it might be--we share our impressions, laughing and enjoying the various imaginations that have been captured on the page. I suggest that they attend an art museum's opening, a concert, or other such happening, and record their observations. Then they can develop that into a descriptive paper, with a possible generalization about their observations. As a way of rethinking classroom activities, I

set aside ten minutes at the class' end to write about what was done in class, what they were thinking about. This way the journal can become a book of discovery and development.

One of the first activities that we engage in is the interviewing of local writers: newspaper reporters and colleagues of mine who write poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. I set the scene by showing a film on Irving Stone, the writer, where he discusses his writing habits and what it means to be a writer. As a class, we share our writing habits, or in many cases--lack of, discussing aspects like time, avoidance of writing, and purpose of the paper that is being written. I encourage them to try different methods, and then inform them that I have gathered a pool of people, who write and publish their work, to be interviewed by them. This activity is derived from the first day interviewing of peers that the students have done and brings a live writer into their grasp.

Breaking into groups of four, determined by the most convenient time for them, they brainstorm. Together they think of questions that they would like to ask a professional writer in the 20 minutes that they will have available for the interview. To prove how knowledge of the subject and audience influences choice, I only tell them about the type of writer they will interview after they have thought of several questions. Based on biographical information and their goals, they make judgements on what questions to keep and what to throw out.

The interview works well with James Moffett's theory of aiding conceptualization, of moving each writer from recording to reporting to explaining to theorizing. The students go to the interview with their questions, of matters that interest them, and record what the

writers say, separating and choosing what to emphasize. What they do choose, helps to explain their view of the writer, and can lead to higher levels of conceptualization.

But before the interview takes place, the students read their questions to the class so that we can discuss similarities or differences and organize them into catagories, such as personal history, motivations for writing, and writing habits. As my beginning writers participate in this task, they are engaged in an analytical process that helps them see that organizing a paper means seeing how your ideas are related, how they fit together. On the handout that you have received, page 5, you will discover a sample breakdown of some of the questions. Then, after the rough drafts are written, the studenst gather in groups to see each others' rough drafts, how they treated the same subject differently, and to help writer make the interviewee come to life.

Though each interview is only twenty minutes long, the students enjoy talking to someone other than their teacher about writing. I'm always delighted when most of the writers interviewed describe their writing as a process that begins in specific perceptions of their own reality, then grows as they refelct upon it: breaking it into pieces, isolating single elements, analyzing and trying to understand little bits of experience and the fragmented ideas they started with. By talking with practicing writers, my students are beginning to discover that writing is in a sense re-discovery, looking again at what happened, seeing the details and relationships that give meaning to experience.

The outcome of this interviewing activity is excellent: I receive batches of papers that evoke a living person, someone the students were pleased to become involved with. The papers use

quotations effectively, and the more observant students make connections between what the writer has mentioned and characteristics of his or her office. Sometimes students even check out work that the author has published, to further explore this new individual. The person interviewed is intriqued by this activity, too and is (if he or she is honest) eager to see the finished result. Those students who are willing and want to share their final paper, often meet with that person again to discuss it.

When I am attempting to have the students become more conscious of their world, observant, and capable of making deductions, I do one of two things. Either I bring in a batch of odd shoes and boots, or I have them bring in an object that is important to them or important to someone that they know. Then, when they are in groups of three or four, I hand out one object per group the aim to examine that item carefully, making deductions about the type of person who owned it, or who it might have belonged to. This exercise makes them inspect the object carefully and draw logical conclusions, reminding them of the helpful and necessary nature of specifics. Imagining a person who could own a blue galosh or stiletto heeled sandal is a small exercise in role-playing, a useful element in writing and mature individuals. As Walker Gibson has written in Persona: "all writing, all expression...implies a self-definition and flexibility in such self-defining is a desirable quality."[2]

Writing a character sketch is a common element of a beginning writer class, yet many students do not use the msot vivid details or characteristics to evoke their individual. In the interest of spontaneity, and clues as to what could make an interesting character

sketch, I show a film on Imogene Cunningham, a well-known photographer who was in her eighties when this biographical film was made. There is a scene where Imogene meticulously photographs a lovely young woman, who is nude. Another scene, where she tries on a variety of unusual hats, each one of these static objects giving the audience a clue to her personality, is charming and helpful. I ask the students to comment in their journal on the hat scene and the nude scene. which is an artistically done sequence that is probably only remembered when I bring it up again.

Then we discuss the technique of illuminating elements of a person's character by concentrating on telling possessions, as seen in this film by Imogene's relationship to her army of hats. The students begin to work on their character sketch, thinking of all the vivid aspects of their person's life, forgetting about the nudity scene. Weeks later, when we have written and discussed the character sketch, what qualities worked well, I put on my best sheepish, slightly disturbed face, and read what I claim to be a letter to the head of the English Department. This letter objects to the shameful showing of a nude film in an English class at a supposedly reputable college.

The students are horrified, initially wondering about whether there will be trouble, and annoyed at this sort of response. I suggest an outlet for their frustration, saying: "Let's write letters to the school paper, expressing our viewpoints. If you agree with the letter, there is no problem; just support your viewpoint. And the same is true of the opposing perspective."

Students write, trying to convince the editor and community that the film was in good taste, and certainly not a "nudie" film

as the author of the indignant letter implies. In groups the students examine each other's letters, appreciating the tones and persuasive elements, noting what information is necessarily included so that the audience will have a sense of the particulars of the dispute.

The letters are effective pieces of writing, evolving out of a situation which they are involved in. They work well with the tactics of persuasion and argument as well. Although it is a contrived situation, it still conveys the sense of how, to use Peter Elbow's effective title, it is possible to "write with power." It also demonstrates the power of words carefully chosen, of an idea that has an involvement behind it.

Later, when I inform them of the little white trick that I've played on them, they laugh, and admit to my ability to "pull one over." Little do they realize that I have done more than that--they they are now writing in response to situations, using their skills honed in groups on how to organize their thoughts. Writing is now a valid, acceptable, and in many cases, enjoyable way to respond. And the audience, their peers, are all attentive because they are responding to the same impetus and are eager to see how others have approached the same problem or idea.

Lest you think that my basic writing classes are a combination of horse and buggy acts and that you could never duplicate these activities, it is not the materials that are the integral part but the <u>spirit</u> of them. Each situation takes advantage of students' worlds, that they, too, have something to contribute and share, and plays upon the desire to be read, heard, and understood, to have what is theirs taken into consideration and appreciated.

Another element of writing's value can be supported and

explored in this manner: Each student is asked to write in the journal about a problem, or something that bothers them. Then they do a rough draft, working on communicating some of the thoughts that the journal entry expressed. Gathering in groups, they work on how they have communicated that problem, through analogy, examples, or a long description. Then, in a totally new group, they pass their finished papers around. But here, on a seperate sheet of paper, the students write a response to the problems that they have read about, making suggestions on how to approach them or overcome them. Instead of handing in a paper that expressively relates something close to them and wainting for my comments, the student has found immediately a caring, responsible audience. Here is someone who will immediately take that probelm into consideration and offer a written reaction. Then that student, like all the other students, has an authentic reply, to take home and think about. Writing assumes its natural place: it communicates ideas that are close to the student and gives him and her something to hold onto and review. Writing is then a communication to share--a real situation.

Notes

[1]Linda Shadiow, "Eureka! Moments and Reflection Questions," in How to Handle the Paper Load, Chair. Gene Standford (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1979), p. 65.

[2]Walker Gibson, Persona: A Style Study for Readers and Writers (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 51.

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"The Basic Comp Class as Rhetorical Situation"

The student writings in this collection represent various aspects of the basic writing class that I teach. The only paper that is considered to be finished is the first paper on Andy Rooney. This paper was derived from a journal entry that the student did spontaneously that simply described Mr. Rooney. When asked to discuss what was so pleasing about that individual, the student responded with a witty persuasive paper. This was then worked in in peer groups and rewritten in the version that you have here.

Paper #2 is an in-class freewriting that is very rough; you see it in its first version. The next stage that it went through was revision, helped by the suggestions from the in-class groups. The student generated that paper about his brother's death by responding to the suggestion to describe some image or picture that had stayed with him. The beginning, and its way of making the abstract concrete, was what the class enjoyed most, and proved to be a good example of how to make concepts like freedom more than a cliche.

The journal entries, page four, are excerpted from the students' journals to allow a glimpse of "raw" writing, writing-in-progress. They also reveal differing perspectives that students have on the same activity.

On page five are the questions students generated in groups to ask the writers they interviewed.

Page six is one of the last essays I received from this student. She chose to talk about what it means to be a writer in light of the activities that were done in class over the entire semester. Karl Barneby, the individual she quotes from, is the writer that her group interviewed.

None of these papers have been written by the same student.

News editorials, what a bore! Right? Well, a lot of times it depends on whose editorial it is you're referring to. First, you have your editorials on television which are usually presented by an overweight and montone-voiced station manager. Then, there are the newspaper editorials, giving the public their ridiculing and biased views on certain topics. And, finally there's Andy Rooney.

Mr. Rooney's off-beat and humorous commentaries set him apart from the rest. The local TV stations, when broadcasting their editorials, will usually have their chubby-cheeked and balding station manager sit in front of a desk with a back drop behind it and read, word for word, what they have written down on the paper. Since these people get paid for their managerial skills, rather than their broadcasting skills, they are usually extremely boring and unprofessional. Rooney, a fiftyish man with haggard hair and bushy eyebrows, presents his view of certain events in his segment of the last ten minutes or so of the popular "60 Minutes" news program. His unique style of broadcasting has made him a personal favorite of mine.

For his "set", he doesn't use the fake back-drops of other editorials, but rather his own messy office. His desk sits in front of bookshelves with an arrangement so unorganized that it seems impossible for this to be his real office, the one he works in everyday. And on his desk are stacks of papers and folders strewn about it, leaving just enough room for his typewriter. One of his commentaries dealt with the fact that people always asked him if the office shown on the program was actually his, because no one believed that he could possibly be so messy.

His presentation of editorials is also quite different than those of other newspapers. If he finds something that he doesn't like, he comes straight out and says it. And when the cameras are rolling, he speaks right into them, just as though he was talking to each person out there individually. The station manager editorialists usually have their eyes glued to the paper, keeping a straight face and putting little emphasis into their words. Rooney also uses visual aids, which help to get his point across. If he is talking about a certain product, he has it right there, demonstrating his gripes about it.

What often makes Mr. Rooney's editorials funny is the fact he sometimes speaks on seemingly trivial matters that no one else thinks about but are present in our everyday life. One such editorial was his examination of what to do with all of the little worn down pieces of soap that we have after prolonged use. One of his solutions was to save them all and, when there are enough to make a complete bar, heat them up until they melt and than make your own bar. But all of this effort is hardly worth the trouble, so he concluded that the only practical thing to do was to make soap bars with hollow insides so you wouldn't be left with all of these little nubs of soap. Another of his segments had to do with the actions of Speaker of the House, Tip O'Neal, during State of the Union addresses from ex-President Carter and President Regan. Rooney showed exerts from these State of the Union messages of O'Neal, who sits directly behind the presidents, scratching his ear, fixing his glasses, adjusting his tie, coughing, and just every little thing that no one else would ever notice.

But Rooney can also have a somewhat serious side. He was recently speaking on how the child-proof tops on medicines and poisons are oftentimes adult-proof also. He commented on the government standard which states that if a 50 year old man cannot open the bottle within five minutes, then the top would be redesigned. He then said that he would be willing to spend an extra five minutes opening a top if it prevented one child from dying from getting into the contents of the bottle.

So you think editorials are boring? Tune into Andy Rooney one Sunday night, and I think he'll change your view.

Freedom was an open road, a good friend, and a Harley Davidson motoring down that highway. His long brown hair flowing out from underneath a helmet, a thick Fu-Manchu wrapping itself around his chin and a touch of sunshine in his usually cold green eyes, was my picture of him. The asphalt rolls away beneath the tires as a man and his Harley becomes a blur to the world he passes through.

A blur is a terrible description of a person's life but it is a representation of time only and not character. To all around him he was a solid force which left a deep impression on anyone who ever had the chance to know him, a catalyst who sparked to life those hidden feelings and yearnings that need some motivation from the outside. He was able to give that encouragement that was needed to get you going in those directions you were otherwise unsure of starting towards.

Other people were a big concern but never were they put ahead of his own. Life was the enjoyment of accomplishment, whether it was major or just personally satisfying. Biking around the country was his goal which everyone warned him against attempting. He listened to their advice but went ahead with it anyway. He got more out of that trip than just sore legs, he had fulfilled a quest which he was told he shouldn't try. Doing the impossible was a big high for him and the biggest he got was when he was able to beat the draft three times in a row. Three crash diets and three rejections, what could be nicer?

There were the obligations of wife and job; although he wasn't as successful with the former as he would have liked, he never gave up either without a struggle. Never giving up what he believed in was an important priority to him. "Fight extra hard when someone fucks around with life or what you feel is yours and you'll come out on top, eventually," he would say. How he managed to stick to that I'll never know, but he did. The mill fired him because he refused to work over and for five years he stuck to what he thought was a wrongdoing. Getting his job and back pay back wasn't nearly as important as the fact that he didn't let them push him aside when he knew he was right.

Some people have to buy new clothes whenever the old ones become worn but Tom just added another patch. Resoled boots and old T shirts were easy to take care of and comfortable which was how he like it. Never putting on for anyone, just a simple life was what he enjoyed and surrounded himself with. And old house with old furniture and improvising instead of buying if there was anything else he needed. There were Bar-B-Q's down by the river or on the pontoon, camping and of course 4 wheelin' around the dunes, but the mud and snow would suit him just fine, too.

It's hard for some to imagine what you can get out of racing up and down sand hills or burying yourself in four feet of mud but Tom did it for himself not for them. It is just hours of harmless hell-raising, and besides rolling over or being stopped by a tree on occasion, it is pure fun. It was also a great relief valve for all the pressures of the day and for his temper which had a very short fuse. He was glad to release it on some innocent snowbank rather than on another person.

A short temper is probably the worst trait anyone can have and Tom had a bad one. It was especially bad when someone would mess with him while he was on his bike and a few cars and their doors kicked after pulling out in front of him and setting him off. When he was working it wasn't unusual to see a wrench fly across the room if he was having a problem with something. He had some control over it when it came up around other people but it was still a good practice to leave him alone when he became angry.

Freedom, Tom looked for it on his Harley and it was on his Harley that unfortunately, it found him. The freedom that took him just wasn't what he had had in mind.

These journal entries have been written in class in response to a poem and picture that another student brought in to share. These are considered freewritings, written to explore an idea or thought without concern for mechanics. If the students discover something that they like in their journal or others, they may expand upon it. They also share this entry with their classmates and comment on the differing perceptions.

Gregg:

One line is the poem "Gray Weather" strikes my attention: "Nothing that shines, nothing is dark, neither happiness nor sorrow nor person. The sun's tooth is sheathed in a cloud." There has always been something special to me about an overcast day, but I could never really describe it. This line describes it perfectly.

An overcast day gives me a feeling of neutrality; nothing is great about it and nothing is horrible about it. It's kind of a silvery background that makes one realize how green trees really are or how orange our football team's uniforms really are. If you put something birlliant up against the sun and a blue sky, it really isn't brilliant because the sun is so much more brilliant and on a cloudy day (very cloudy), you can't tell the difference.

Jeff:

Jeffers uses personification very well in his poem, "Gray Weather." He used very descriptive words to bring the reader into the scene he is trying to recreate. By using such lines as "the sun's tooth sheathed in cloud," Jeffers makes these things even more human and therefore closer to the reader. Jeffers gives nature these human characteristics in such a beautiful manner that he draws you into the poem. He puts you there in the pounding surf. You can see the sun hidden by the clouds, and you can feel the breeze blowing at your back. You can hear the surf from "pounds the worn granite drum." You can feel the waves being drawn in powerfully.

Interviewing Writers: Student Generated Questions and Catagories

The students thought of these questions in preparation for interviewing the writer that their group was assigned to question. As a class, we organized the questions into catagories, admitting that these catagories were not inflexible or strict.

Habits

Where do you write?
When do you write?
Do you like to use special equipment? Why?
How do you write? Do you jot down ideas, type it out first, etc.?
Do you keep a journal?
Do you write a great deal? Do you also read a great deal?

History

How long have you been writing?
What have you published?
Did you take freshman writing?
Was your writing ever rejected? How did you feel?

Attitudes

What do you like about the process of writing?
Why did you first start writing?
What is your favorite book?
Who is your favorite author? Why?
Is there someone that you imitate or admire?

Hints

What did you find most useful in becoming a writer? Practice?
Observation? Experience?
What would you suggest to a beginning writer?
What's the most important aspect of good writing for you?
For you, what makes good writing?

Future

What would you like to write about?
What do you see as the most popular form of literature?

Not all groups asked these questions. Students kept the ones that they wanted to know about and offered some variations on the ones discussed. What they enjoyed from this activity was the sense that they, as writers, were talking to another writer.